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ABSTRACT

A discussion of verb intransitivization in English grammar looks at different verb classes that allow or do not allow this phenomenon. The semantic primitive of involvement is a phenomenon that attempts to find related features in sentences where intransitivization occurs. Semantic involvement patterns are assigned in the subject or direct object noun phrase of a sentence; meaning is contingent upon the verb and the inferences that may be drawn from that verb in a given context. Four involvement patterns are distinguished. Two types of intransitivization, unergative and unaccusative, are also described and illustrated. It is proposed that both types are predictable from the involvement semantics within the constructions, eliminating the need to refer to lexical specification. (MSE)

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INVOLVEMENT SEMANTICS

LSA MEETING 1986 New York

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Intransitivization is a puzzling phenomenon and it does not become less puzzling when verbs are specified for the different argument structures, they may occur in, as is done in the lexicon of so many linguistic frameworks.

What I will do here is shed some light on the semantics of different transitive verb classes that allow or do not allow intransitivization. I will use only one semantic primitive - the primitive of involvement. This primitive is assigned to the subject or the direct object NP depending on the inferences we can make on the base of the verb meaning about the involvement of the entities they denote. When clear inferences are possible, the NP is considered involved; if not, it is considered minus involved. This leads to the definition in (1).

(1) An NP is marked [+involved] when the meaning of the verb allows you to make clear inferences about the way in which the entity denoted by it is involved; in all other cases the [-involved]-feature is assigned.

Perception verbs like to hear in (2a) or to see in (2b) only tell

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us something about what happens to the entity denoted by the subject NP. It creates a hearing or a seeing event through its particular properties as an animate being. Nothing happens to the entity denoted by the direct object NP, that we can define using the fact that someone hears or sees it. The noise may simply be there, and be heared or not heared consequently and the entity seen does not need to do anything that relates to its being seen: it only needs to be visible to the seeer. Perception verbs have the pattern in (2c).

(2) a He heard the music inside the building

b He saw Peter on the bridge

c +involved / -involved

Action verbs like to drink in (3a) imply the involvement of both the entities denoted by the subject and the direct object NP. The former entity has to perform some well defined acts in order to drink and the latter entity undergoes the drinking by being swallowed etc. This means that verbs like to drink specify what happens to these entities. The pattern in (3b) emerges.

(3) a He drank a glass of milk

b +involved / +involved

Another observation one can make about involvement: some verbs allow us to make inferences about the nature of the involvement of the entity denoted by their subject NP; others do not. The entity denoted by the subject NP of perception verbs in (2) is obviously involved through the physical and mental processes taking place in its head. These are either the process of seeing or of hearing. The involvement of the entity denoted by the subject NP of break-type

verbs as in (4), however, is very difficult to describe.

(4) a He broke the vase

b He tore the newspaper

(4a) and (4b) say nothing about what the entity denoted by the subject NP has to do to break or tear an object. In one extreme case, this entity would hardly be involved. It may, for instance, simply pass by and step on a vase or a newspaper and break or tear it. Very little can be said about its actions and its involvement (that is: the role it plays in the event). In another extreme case, the entity denoted by the subject NP may really work on breaking or tearing an object by acting in certain ways. Note that the meaning of the verb still does not tell us what kind of actions these are. The meaning of the constructions in (4) thus do not allow us to make clear inferences about the nature of the activity of the entity denoted by the subject NP. But this is not the case for (2) and (3), where the entity denoted by the subject NP can only be involved as a "seer", a "hearer", or a "drinker". It is clear, however, what happens to the entity denoted by the direct object NP: it breaks or tears. This means that these two verbs only allow us to make inferences about the involvement of their object NP. We can assign them the pattern in (5).

(5) -involved / +involved

A fourth involvement-pattern occurs when there are two [-involved] NPs. This is when we cannot make clear inferences about the involvement of the entities denoted by both the subject and the direct object NP. This is the case with the verb <u>to dominate</u>, when it

expresses a relation in space.

(6) a The big tree dominated the whole backyard

b -involved / -involved

Nothing can be derived from the verb meaning about the ways in which the tree is involved in dominating something, as it does not "do" something - it simply stands in a certain location. The verb meaning does not specify either in which way the backyard is involved in being dominated. Pattern (6b) emerges.

Involvement specifies where the breaking, drinking or hearing takes place, or, for that matter, where the dominating does not take place. It specifies the exact location of these events. This pattern can be called event space or the space taken in by the event during its existence. Note that I am not using the pragmatic situation each sentence in (2) - (6) refers to. I am using instead the information language provides us with regarding these situations. A causer of a breaking event may very well be an actor, but this is of no importance to my analysis.

Subject NPs and direct object NPs are marked as either [+involved] or [-involved]. This leads to the following four classes of transitive verbs.

(7)	NP	V	NP
a)	+	drink	+
b)	+	see	-
c)	-	break	+
d)	-	dominate	-

(7) shares some features with Vendler's (1967) verb typology: (7a) contains the action verbs; (7b) the achievements; (7c) the accomplishments; (7d) the stative verbs. Note that, you can express accomplishment with verbs not covered by (7c), as has been observed in Dowty (1979). Action verbs in (7a) can express accomplishment as well, but they are still different from the verbs of the category (7c) - there subject and direct object NP are both marked as [+involved].

It is interesting that a more philosophical analysis of agency and causation, as in Vendler (1984), can be easily fitted into the system of Involvement Semantics. Vendler says that actions are done and not caused by something. Events, in turn, can be caused by actions. The author defines events as changes of state. An action may cause a vase to break, but an action cannot cause an arm to rise - this is something done by the actor. There is a strictly linguistic explanation for this difference. The subject of action verbs is marked as [+involved] and as such it is clearly part of the event expressed by the sentence. The subject of causative verbs is marked as [-involved]. Involvement Semantics does not exclude the interpretation that the involvement of this entity in another event or, more specifically, in an action, functions as the cause. Involvement Semantics predicts this, albeit in a round about way: you may wonder how an entity can be the cause of an event, if at best it plays only a marginal role in it. This can only be if it is involved in another event and does something or has something happening to it, rather than when it just sits around statically.

In Davidson (1971), activity and causative verbs are

distinguished in a different way. Certain verbs can only be considered actions after we know more about them than what the verb tells us. But other verbs let us know right away whether they are an action verb or not. For something to be called an action under Davidson's approach, it is necessary that the agent does something intentionally. When somebody sinks a boat, this is an action when done in a planned way, but it is not when done through the pushing of a button, because of falling on it, with the result that a torpedo is fired that sinks the boat. Drinking cannot be done unintentionally. An agent may drink coffee instead of tea unintentionally, still he is performing the action of drinking intentionally. This dichotomy in terms of intentionality matches our distinction between break-type verbs or causatives and drink-type verbs or activities. Causatives do not tell us whether an action is intended or not; activities always imply an intended action, although this action may have an unintended outcome. Causatives sometimes imply an intended act. Yet even if they do, there is no reason to consider them activities in my system of Involvement. I categorize causative verbs differently because they do allow for this ambiguity, while activity verbs do not. Even when causatives have a subject denoting an agent that acts intentionally, their behaviour with respect to different grammatical phenomena does not change, as we will see later. For example, they do not allow unaccusative intransitivization, when the subject is an agent in Davidson's terms nor do they allow this rule when it is a mere causer.

I will now focus on two types of intransitivization: unergative

and unaccusative Intransitivization.

An example unergative intransitivization is the alternation between the transitive and intransitive verbs in (8) and (9).

(8) a He was drinking beer

b He was drinking

(9) a They were reading a book

b They were reading

Only verbs with the involvement pattern in (10) can undergo unergative intransitivization.

(10) NP	V	NP
+inv	eat	+inv
	drink	
	read	

Perception verbs like the one in (11), causative verbs like the one in (12), and stative verbs like the one in (13) cannot be intransitivized this way.

(11) a He felt the wind in his hair

+inv -inv

*b He felt

(12) a He broke the glass

-inv +inv

*b He broke (i.e. an object)

(13) a The painting dominated the whole room

-inv -inv

*b The painting dominated

When the verbs in (11)-(13) take on a different meaning, they can be

intransitivized or else they can have an intransitive counterpart with the same meaning, as in (14b). In that case the involvement pattern is like that of verbs such as to eat; that is verbs of group (10). The counterparts of (11)-(13) having a different involvement pattern are given in (14)-(16).

(14) a He felt my arm
+inv +inv

b He was feeling about
+inv

(15) a He broke his relation with her
+inv +inv

b He broke with her
+inv

(16) a The big guy dominated the whole group
+inv +inv

b The big guy dominated
+inv

The verb meaning tells us in which way the entities denoted by the subject NP in (14)-(16) are involved. In (14), the entity denoted by he is actively involved in an action of feeling about. In (11), he is not, since we have a perception verb. In (15), the entity denoted by the subject NP is actively involved in breaking up a relation. The sentence does not imply that he can just do anything which can have the effect of the "breaking" coming about, like in (12). The subject NP in (15) is more than a causer - it is an entity that makes a decision. In (16), the involvement of the entity denoted by he is easy

to determine as well. This entity performs certain acts which lead to its domination over a group of persons. This entity cannot just do anything to dominate this group like passing by on a sidewalk, without being further involved. In (13), dominate is used statively and no involvement is implied whatsoever, only a relation between two objects. (16a) also has a stative interpretation, but here intransitivization is not possible.

The entities denoted by the direct objects in (14)-(16) are involved as follows. In (14) this entity is acted upon by being touched, but not in (11). In (15), this entity is broken as in (12). In (16) this entity undergoes the effects of the domination, unlike in (13) where no involvement is implied.

It is quite common to consider intransitivization a process that depends on the lexical idiosyncrasies of transitive verbs. This is implicit in studies done within the Lexical Fuctional Grammar Framework such as Bresnan (1982). My approach does not predict unergative intransitivization using verb idiosyncracies. Rather, it uses the semantics of transitive constructions to do so. However, this is only possible if we use a system of semantic description based on the notion of involvement.

Unaccusative intransitivization is the change of verbs in (17) and (18) from transitive to intransitive.

(17) a He opened the door

b The door opened

(18) a He tore his shirt

b His shirt tore

Both Perlmutter (1978) and Marantz (1981) use this change to motivate unaccusativity. The prediction is that unaccusative intransitivization is only possible with verbs that have an involvement pattern as in (19). This is the pattern of causative verbs.

(19) NP V NP
-inv break +inv
tear
explode

Verbs other than the ones represented by (19) cannot undergo this type of intransitivization, as in (20)-(22).

(20) a Mary saw the museum of modern art
+inv -inv
*b The museum of modern art saw
-inv

(21) a Martha was reading the newspaper
+inv +inv
*b The newspaper was reading

(22) a The box contained two books
+inv -inv
*b Two books contained

Sometimes verbs with the involvement pattern of (19) occur with a different pattern. This is often the pattern of action verbs. Unaccusative intransitivization is not possible in these cases. Two examples are given in (23) and (24).

(23) a He opened a bank account
+inv +inv

*b The bank account opened

(24) a That row of trees breaks the wind

+inv +inv

*b The wind breaks.

The entity denoted by the subject NP in (23) needs to do a few well defined acts in order to open an account. He cannot just do anything to cause the account to open. In (24) some well defined properties of the row of trees make the wind change direction. It is not just some indefinite cause that is at the base of this. Unaccusative intransitivization is impossible in both cases because the constructions do not exhibit the right involvement pattern. Only a verb with a [-involved] subject and a [+involved] direct object allows this type of intransitivization. The verbs in (23) and (24) have counterparts that do allow unaccusative intransitivization. But their subject NPs are [-involved] because it can take on any role to be a cause of the event expressed in the construction.

(25) a He opened the box

b The box opened

(26) a He broke the plank

b The plank broke

The entity denoted by the subject NP in (25a) and (26a) can act and open or break objects using his hands. The sentences, however, may also denote situations in which the entity denoted by the subject NP in (25a) simply throws over a box with the result that it opens, or in (26a) simply steps on a plank in passing by and break it. Every type of "action" is allowed as long as it can be the cause of

the opening or the breaking.

Unaccusative like unergative intransitivization is predictable on the base of Involvement Semantics. This means that it is not necessary to take refuge to lexical specification in the lexicon of this alternation. It is only necessary to take into account the semantics of the constructions at hand in terms of involvement.[1]

NOTES

[1] The system of Involvement Semantics can be used to single out those verb classes that may from the ones that may not intransitivize. It has not been explained why certain verb classes allow unaccusative or unergative intransitivization and others do not. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find a solution for this important issue.

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